

# Why Forgiveness Matters

**Trust and forgiveness are essential components to a healthy relationship.**

Why does forgiveness matter? Put simply, if a person cannot forgive, there is very little reason to continue to trust. Trust and forgiveness are essential components to a healthy relationship. For centuries philosophers and theologians have grappled with the complexity of forgiveness and sought to answer the question of why it matters. Recently, innovative researchers have defined forgiveness as:

- 1 Taking less personal offense
- 2 Reducing anger and the blaming of the offender
- 3 Developing an increased understanding of situations that often lead to feeling hurt and angry

Addressing the issue of forgiveness with couples and explaining why it matters can be challenging. For some couples, forgiving comes more easily. For others it means forgetting being wronged and can be associated with being violated or wanting revenge. Many people respond to hurt by protecting



themselves from being vulnerable to another. The good news is that forgiveness can be learned. For those who teach marriage and relationship education (MRE), it can be challenging to teach how to forgive and understand why forgiveness is often difficult to achieve.

MRE facilitators need to be aware that talking about forgiveness can bring up past hurts. Help couples understand that forgiveness is a choice, it is a process and to accomplish it couples must communicate openly.

MRE facilitators need to be aware that talking about forgiveness can bring up past hurts. Help couples understand that forgiveness is a choice, it is a process and to accomplish it couples must communicate openly. This can be very difficult and it may be beneficial to have coaches in the room when discussing this topic. It is good practice to end a workshop that addresses this topic on a positive note.

Most MRE curricula address forgiveness. However, it is important for practitioners to be comfortable with the topic and be able to talk about it in their own words. It can be conceptualized as a transforming experience that fosters more positive emotions and less negative thoughts. Take the time to determine what forgiveness means to you. Explain to couples that although forgiveness can be difficult, it can also

be healthy. The implications of forgiveness, studies show, include reducing anger as a coping style, reducing perceived stress and alleviating strain on the cardiovascular system and immune system. Below are some strategies you can share with the couples or individuals with whom you work to address forgiveness.

- 1 Accept that interactions can be the heart of joyful learning or the source of hurt and pain. It is an individual's choice to frame it one way or the other.
- 2 Reflect on your mutual behaviors during the day and focus on the actions that are life-giving and kind.
- 3 Spend little time reflecting on mistakes that you make or those that your partner makes.
- 4 Build on your strengths and manage your weaknesses together. Develop those positive aspects of yourself that come naturally and learn to accept with humility those areas of your life that are not as positive. Do the same for your partner.
- 5 Learn to live without perfection. Forgive yourself and your partner for being imperfect.
- 6 Expect some pain in life and expect humans to make mistakes.
- 7 Understand that there is little value in holding grudges; they only weigh you down.

8 Slow down the pace of making judgments on people's actions and speed up the process of walking in their footsteps. Empathy and understanding of one's history can ward off a great deal of unnecessary, incorrect interpretations.

9 Focus on your abilities, achievements, and goals as a couple instead of focusing on others. Focusing on others' accomplishments can lead to jealousy and endless deprecation.

10 Learn the art of detachment. Be able to detach from the issue or problem causing the pain and look at it without emotion or judgment.

Part of teaching forgiveness is to encourage your workshop participants to replace old habits of thought with new ones. Talking with couples about forgiveness requires coaching them on how to accept human imperfections, move past hurtful behavior, and enjoy a healthy future with their partner without resentment. Forgiveness is one of the keys to any lasting romantic relationship.

***The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC) would like to thank W. Nicholas Abraham, M.Div., Ph.D., L.P.C, a Military and Family Life Consultant, for his contributions to this Tip Sheet. The NHMRC would also like to thank Sarah Byington and Rachel Derrington, MSW, for their contributions. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR, and Jeanette Hercik, PhD, and project manager Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH.***